SMILE

COMMODITY ISSUE

PLAGIARIZE

LIVE A MYTH

YOUR PRESENT IS AT STAKE

In a capitalist society, the economy functions through the exchange of commodities for money, which can then be exchanged for more commodities. The basis of such a society is therefore the commodity itself, upon which all financial and economic transactions depend. It would seem that commodities are those items which fulfill the basic requirements of life, including food, shelter, and clothing. The specific nature of capitalism, however, is based on the creation of profit which is derived from the sale of excess or surplus commodities. Because of this built-in dependence on the constant increase of capital, the commodity has been transformed into a general commodity relationship. As the economy grows bigger and bigger it must be constantly supplied with new commodities to be exchanged. Therefore the commodity is no longer just a basic unit or aspect of survival but has been extended to include almost everything. [The items that fulfill the basic (and more complex) needs of certain groups or individuals, or use values, are tailored to the specific needs that arise from specific living conditions. Commodities are produced not for specific needs, but for their exchange value, and are mass-marketed.] In short, anything can be bought or sold, things that once were never part of such exchange relationships. This includes entertainment, sex, personal health, and even ideas and other people. This is the commodity relationship, in which everything that exists is viewed as a possible way to make money. As a result of this relationship a commodity culture has evolved in which the commodity relationship has been extended into the human realm and is now the basis of the way in which we interact with each other. We treat the entire world that we experience, including our friends and loved ones, and even the relationships between us and them, as commodities, things which can be bought or sold, possessed or disposed of at will. So while technology and material wealth have increased for some under capitalism, there has also been a disintegration of social relationships that results from the very same process. Our commodity culture has produced a great deal of alienation. Alienation is defined as "a withdrawing or seperation of a person or his affections from an object or position of former attachment". Culturally, this means a seperation from our environments - people, the earth, material items, and other living creatures. Because nearly everything is viewed as an object which can be possessed or manipulated in some way (bought, sold, owned) people no longer feel the emotional and psychological bonds to their environments that the people of primitive cultures did. The view of earlier cultures toward material objects as well as natural processes (such as seasonal changes, rain, snow, and the cycles of the moon and stars) was a spiritual one, and all things material were considered alive. Religious rituals served the function of establishing and strengthening the psychological, emotional, and physical relationships between people and their environments, and in this way people were connected with their surroundings and with each other. Science and rationalism have greatly devalued religion in the minds of many Western people, however, and this connection has been lost. The world now appears as a collection of impermanent and lifeless objects which are at the disposal of the individual but have no substantial connection to her/him. This is the root of alienation - people are seperated at a basic level from the items, people, and events which make up their lives.

In a commodity culture, whoever controls the flow of commodities can manipulate the commodity relationship and thus contol a very large portion of people's lives. This control can occur in different ways. There is the obvious and direct oppression of people, such as the Romans used against their subjects, killing them if they did not meet their demands. Today, modern societies, particularly that of the U.S., seem liberated to some degree from such oppression (at least for the white middle and upper classes). But there is a much more subtle form of control in use today. In capitalist societies the commodity relationship itself is such a means of control. As long as the basic commodity world-view exists, in which people treat everything as objects to be exploited, they can be persuaded to constantly consume. Even though people may choose to consume items that vary greatly from those consumed by other individuals, it is the basic 'need' for consumption that everyone in Western societies shares. One person may enjoy music, while another likes sculpture, and yet another physical fitness. No matter what one likes one is taught at a very early age to consume the goods that will bring happiness. It is this basic relationship, this general attitude, that forms the dominant ideology, and not its outer decorations of varying choices. It does not matter what a person buys, so long as they view happiness as something which can be bought. In this way, those who manufacture goods can assure an increasing profit by constantly introducing new goods and services. And today, huge corporations are buying immense pertions of the 'free market' so that they are able to profit from many, many different commodities. The dominant ideology operates on an 'understood' basis, one which is difficult to recognize in oneself, because it seems to be the natural condition of things. People assume that the ideas and attitudes contained in the dominant ideology are more or less permanent results of reality - "things have always been this way". In fact, they are the result of economic and social factors which are largely controlled by those who can influence the dominant ideology. For instance, in the U.S. it was the practice for the first 150 years (and often still is) for women to recieve little education and to be exclusively homemakers, raising children, while men held the paying or production-oriented jobs. Today,vast numbers of women do not live this way, but to people of the 19th century this seemed to be the natural way of life. They would have thought our present-day situation terribly abnormal. And yet this was not always so. This husband-wife relationship has its roots in Christianity. In many pre-Christian cultures women were not only the producers of goods, but were also the originators and practicioners of the known sciences. (For instance, among the Hopi Indians, women were responsible for the majority of productive work, making and growing the items necessary for survival. They developed advanced systems of architecture, pottery-making, and agriculture, among other things.) The development of the modern role of women is a historical development, in which Christianity and capitalism both played roles. A fundamental part of Christianity is its rationalist outlook, which helped create conditions vital to the growth of capitalism. These two seemingly different institutions shared this similar world-view, one in which the earth is viewed as a lifeless object to be manipulated. This view extended to social relations as well, and so both capitalism and Christianity played large roles in the formation of a dominant ideology, which in turn influenced cultural practices. These cultural practices, which eventually became tradition, brought about this particular role of women. This is a specific example, but the dominant ideology has a much more basic and far-reaching influence on our behaviour. What is valued and what is not is greatly influenced by the dominant ideology. The dominant ideology lends value to items, institutions, and processes. So those who control the dominant ideology are able to exert a great amount of control over our lives.

In the last 40 years, the amount of control over our views and opinions has increased dramatically. Those in power, whether they were royalty, priests, or medieval land-owners, have always exerted a large amount of control over public opinion. It was not until the invention and perfection of the modern Media, however, that the actual world-views of the masses could be so heavily influenced. Today, because of the nature of the world we live in, people increasingly rely on newspapers, television, radio, and advertisements of all sorts for direction and guidance on how to relate to the world. And while the Media claims to be an objective reflection of events that occur in the world, this is far from the truth. Media is a money-making business, and it must sell its product to survive. Its success is determined by ratings, which in turn attracts advertisers, who pay large sums of money to advertise their products. Any information that comes from the Media is shaped by these crucial economic considerations. Even though the subject-matter may vary from program to program, the basic style of presentation is pre-determined (by those who control the money, i.e. the sponsoring companies, the advertisers). As stated earlier, it is precisely because we no longer have the spiritual and ritualistic bonds to our environments that the emphasis of life is on quantity, not quality. This is what modern-day capitalism thrives on - finding new commodities and producing more of everything. And in such a situation the style of presentation of a product becomes more important than the content of the product itself. People must be convinced to consume or else the entire system will collapse. And so Media fulfulls this logical need (convincing people to consume) in our technological society. It does this not by concentrating on the content and meaning of the various aspects of life, but on their presentation, how they appear, i.e., their image. This focus on image allows new commodities to be sold as long as they can obtain the proper image. Thus if something does not have the 'correct' image or style of presentation, then it will not be viewed as valid or credible. This does not only apply strictly to advertisement, but extends to other Media functions as well, such as news reporting. In this way material can be slanted in one way or another, giving a certain view more importance than another. For instance, giving one topic more attention than another can make it seem more important than another topic, which may not actually be the case. For example, the recent cocaine scare in the Media was mostly hype, as drug use did not increase as drastically as was reported. And so our ideas and opinions can be shaped, because the real emphasis of Media material is on presentation and not on content. However, Media is, ultimately, the way in which the dominant ideology expresses itself. Media is an example of the fact that the so-called dominant ideology is a dynamic, active force and not a rigid set of rules and regulations.

Today, the Media constantly bombard us with the philosophy of 'uniqueness'. Great emphasis is placed on being unique, different from others, 'doing your own thing'. There are more and more specialized products to fit more and more 'unique' and specialized interests. Yet, seen from a larger scale this is absurd, this notion of being able to buy our uniqueness. Being unique has become identified with feeling good about ourselves, with having a <u>real</u> identity. And yet, it is this very philosophy which allows the commodity relationship to exist. Only in a world of unique and seperate individuals, without the close collective bonds to each other and the world, does there exist the conditions of alienation and loneliness which drive people to seek out real and meaningful experience in the marketplace. And the Media constantly tells us we can either buy this experience or else buy things which will help us get it. (Take, for instance, Coca-Cola. Ads tell us it's 'the <u>real</u> thing'. Ads for cigarettes and soft drinks (and many, many other products) often show people surfing, skiing, swimming - having fun, enjoying life. The message is 'enjoy life to its fullest capacity with our product'.) In the same process, the Media also hypnotises us. By associating meaningful experiences with commodities (and if successful, attaching them to one another), the Media creates the illusion that we are satisfied

once we own certain commodities. Since most people in the U.S. today own many commodities, the illusion become a general one of widespread happiness and fulfillment of desires. Because of this many people are blind to the evidence of alienation and frustration in their own lives, and have become increasingly more bewildered and confused.

As our economy expands more and more things become commodities, and less and less real experience is actually available to the individual. We must now buy this experience, (especially) if we are to be fully 'unique' and at the same time not left out. The concepts of uniqueness and originality are being used to turn every part of life into commodities. Today, even ideas are commodities, property of certain individuals. Copyright laws prohibit the free use of information. The thrust of this entire process is to make people pay for everything, even the most basic and essential aspects of life. The result is that every part of life is seperated from the other, every person seperated from the next, and each in their own unique way.

What we are faced with is a world of commodities which has lost real excitement, gratification, and meaning. We must work somehow to change this, to re-establish meaningful connections with our world which will make our lives fulfilling. Since the commodity relationship is at the root of our alienation, we must transform the commodity. We must tailor our ideas as well as our material items to our specific needs and the needs of our communities. This inevitably involves a movement toward producing our own goods. We must regain our lost self-sufficiency. Because we have been dependent for so long on commodities we will have to start small and gradually work toward the goal of being self-sufficient (self-sufficient either individually or collectively in our immediate communities). Because even uniqueness is now a commodity, we have fewer tools and ideas to work with that are free from the commodity relationship and the influence of the dominant ideology. So we must take back as our own what has been marketed and offered to us. We must <u>plagiarize</u>, freely using what is avaliable <u>as our own</u>, not as sole ownership, but avaliable to everyone. We must break down the barriers of false uniqueness by re-inventing our own images, symbols, and means of communication. Plagiarize, for the world is yours.

A GOVERNMENT DOES NOT HAVE TO PUT CHAINS ON PEOPLE WHO WILL PUT THEM ON THEMSELVES. WHAT ARE YOU CHAINED TO ?

SMILE

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